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ABSTRACT

The use of computers in English departments, especially in composition classes, has become a primary site of contention between those who find technology liberating and those who find only new configurations of the same old hierarchies. Much of the excitement stems from a perceived connection between new classroom technologies and current theories of composition pedagogy. For example, computers, especially in networked classrooms, seem to provide a more useful environment for exploring the ways in which knowledge is made collaboratively; constructed by communities rather than discovered by individuals. The computer environment also makes possible a new medium--hypertext--in which many pronouncements of contemporary literary theory can be actualized. This technology democratizes classroom discussion, allowing the students to transcend the limits of the traditional writing classroom. Hypertext is a revolutionary tool, a uniquely electronic form, which denotes text composed of blocks of text and the electronic links that join them, and which can demonstrate the links between different areas of expertise, helping students to see the connections more clearly. The hypermedia system can employ hierarchies of permissions that permit users to read, link to, or modify texts. Questions of how the physical community can be made closer to the virtual one and vice versa and issues of authorship and copyrights remain to be answered. (Contains nine references.) (CR)

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"Don't Believe the Hype": Electronic Textuality and the Composition Classroom

Presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, March 30th, 1996.

> My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism. (343)
>
> -Michel Foucault

I. Introduction: Computer Utopias, Traditional Dystopias

The use of computers in departments of English, and especially in composition classes, has become a primary site of contention between those who find technology liberating and those who find only new configurations of the same old hierarchies. The rhetoric of articles about computers and composition tends to be either ecstatic or fatalistic; either way, the assumption is that a battle of some sort is raging.

All of this talk about the computer revolution (or lack thereof) is overdetermined; there are multiple reasons why this discourse is being produced and re-produced so rapidly. Much of the excitement stems from a perceived connection between new classroom technologies and current theories of composition pedagogy. For example, computers, especially in a networked classroom, seem to provide a more useful environment for exploring the ways in which knowledge is made collaboratively; constructed by communities rather than discovered by individuals.

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Additionally, the computer environment makes possible a new medium - hypertext - in which many pronouncements of contemporary literary theory can be actualized.

The subject of computers and composition is, of course, an exceedingly difficult one about which to generalize; particular programs at particular institutions are subject to different goals, requirements, and funding levels. This paper discusses the rhetoric associated with two pedagogical technologies: real time networked discussions and hypertexts. The proponents of these technologies reveal a utopian optimism, drifting dangerously toward the assumption that the change of medium will *necessarily* have egalitarian, revolutionary results. At the same time, this enthusiasm for new technologies can naturalize the conception of the non-electronic classroom as inevitably hierarchical and anti-democratic. Does plugging-in, I want to ask, make one's teaching automatically revolutionary? Is it possible to be revolutionary and unplugged?

II. Networked Computer Discussions: Real and Ideal

Trent Batson, working with deaf students at Gallaudet, wanted to create an opportunity for language to be learned as it is used. Students would learn written English more quickly and more completely if they wrote with real purposes and for real audiences. Batson wanted to move away from the artificially constructed assignment towards a more "authentic" language use; the result was the English Natural Form Instruction (ENFI) model, made possible by networked computers.

However, Batson soon realized that this change was more significant than he intended: "very quickly . . . it became apparent that the move to the network was not a simple shift from signed to written English; it led to a social shift as well" (99). Although Batson's rhetoric is more jubilant than many, his list of the advantages of computer mediated communication is typical:

> We had moved into a kind of virtual reality. . . . Social trappings, the hierarchy that defines and confines us, had diminished and quieted. . . . We had found "neutral" social space.
>
> . . . Freed of having to be the cardboard figure at the front of the classroom, I became a person again . . . We were more democratic and open with each other than in any other writing class . . .
>
> I liked that I could be just Trent with the class. I became a collaborator in their learning, not the authority, the one who could do no wrong, the great evaluator, the director of all learning, the knowledge giver, the protector of the purity of the language, and all the other absurdly contorted roles we are thrust into as teachers in the traditional writing classroom. (101-2)

Though this original breakthrough was embedded in a specific context, many argue that these benefits are generalizable[1]; the technology democratizes the classroom discussion, allowing the students to transcend the limits of the "traditional writing classroom," and allowing the instructor to reject the absurdly constructed authority roles Batson lists.

What is important to remember, however, is that this new reality is only virtual. When the class returns to "physical reality" Batson must return, at least to some degree, to the role of teacher- especially, perhaps, as "the great evaluator." In other words, the "just Trent" who engages in collaboration with the class on the network, must become again the authority at some point. Should one, for example, use transcripts of on-line discussion sessions as part of the assessment process? If so, doesn't that mean that the "space" the computer facilitates is not as "neutral" or transcendent as it appears?

Some of the problems that arise in computer mediated discussions mirror the problems that arise in the traditional classroom. Students may use inappropriate language, variously defined; in fact, students may feel less restrained in making

racist, sexist, or homophobic comments in an electronic discussion, especially an anonymous or pseudonymous one. Though participants may feel equalized by the medium, it can also be made to record all of their words, making available a panoptic surveillance even greater than that available in the unplugged classroom.

My point is not that networked classrooms and discussions are inherently bad, to use Foucault's distinction with which I began, but that they may be dangerous, when they interact with pre-existing institutional hierarchies between instructors and students as well as inequalities between students. The network may allow the instructor to temporarily step outside of the role of authority, but the necessity of evaluation always resurfaces. "Thus," as Lester Faigley writes, "I do not see easy conclusions about the politics of pedagogy arising from electronic discussions but instead a need to theorize at greater depth and to take into account the richness of the classroom context" (199).

III. Hypertext / Hypermedia: Is There a Class-room in this Text?

Another technological "advance" often touted as revolutionary is the notion of "hypertext." Theodor Nelson describes his experience "discovering" hypertext in significant terms:

> I had enough vision to recognize a handle when I saw it sticking out of a rock. This was like Arthur's sword in the stone; but it was not the handle of a weapon, it was the handle of some other great tool, one I would need in all my academic and creative work.
>
> The wild surmise on a peak in Darien, Balboa looking at the Pacific: "Holy Smoke!" I saw this as the vehicle that would allow me to do more work faster, and thus would satisfy all my ambitions. (48)

Nelson's description places him, literally, in the place of the sovereign authority and the imperialist explorer. The curious shift from the Arthurian metaphor to the

Freudian one, "it was the handle of some other great tool," reveals some of the tension in the passage. Hypertext may be a revolutionary tool, but it is still to be used in the service of personal "ambitions."

Hypertext is a uniquely electronic form; although analogues exist, ideal hypertexts cannot exist off-line. In George Landow's definition: "Hypertext . . . denotes text composed of blocks of text . . . and the electronic links that join them" (1992, 4). Within a hypertext, in theory, all the blocks of text are equal: "One experiences Intermedia [a specific hypertext system] as an indefinitely decenterable and recenterable system" (1989, 185). Thus hypertext "creates an almost embarrassingly literal embodiment" of post-structural theories which suggest the power of the reader in constructing the text and argue that the apparent linearity and monologic nature of traditional texts is an illusion. But for whom is the embodiment embarrassing, and why? The proponents of hypertexts may be embarrassed because the connection reveals the many debts hypertext owes to codex. The theorists, on the other hand, might be embarrassed to see their complex theories of reading so simplified.

> Landow claims that hypertext, by its very nature, teaches critical thinking:
>
> . . . the notion that an educated intelligence perceives any particular phenomenon as potentially multi-determined and subject to multi-causation. [Hypertext's] graphic presentation of data and its ability to allow multiple links to individual documents encourages the habit of approaching literary (or other) fact from multiple directions. (1989, 176)

In other words, because hypertext demonstrates the links between different areas of expertise, students see the connections more clearly. Although traditional academic texts have always made reference to other texts (through footnotes, for example), a hypertext system diminishes the difference between internal and external texts. "[I]nexperienced or unskilled students fail to make use of introductions, footnotes,

glossaries, and other apparatus created specifically for them," Landow notes; "Many novice readers do not find such information of interest because they lack the necessary reading sills and cannot recognize the relevance of the information offered. . . . it might be argued that after students have used electronic hypertext, they can make better use of the printed version" (1989, 183).

But will "novice readers" or "inexperienced or unskilled students" be any better at reading the hypertext? Hypertext is most effective for students who are already familiar with, or to some degree proficient in, the use of personal computers. Just as traditional print methods of gesturing towards extra-textual materials, e.g. footnotes, are more effective for some students than for others, hypertexts will be read more effectively by students who are adept at the human / computer interface. Students who have been exposed to computers at home or at school from a young age will have some advantage over students meeting the computer for the first time— and these differential abilities are likely to fall along lines of socio-economic background.

Hypertext is also more beneficial, or more profitable, for those who have the authority and ability to make the links rather than following them. John Slatin suggests that "hypertext systems tend to envision three different types of readers: the reader as browser, as user, or as co-author" (875). Delany and Landow add a distinction between "passive" and "interactive" hypertext systems: "a fully interactive system (*Context32* is a notable example), allows users to edit, add or delete blocks of text, and also to modify the links between blocks" (21). But *Context32*, a specific implementation of hypertext in the classroom, is more than just a notable example; it's an extraordinarily unusual example. "In practice," they admit, "the freedom of interactive users will probably need to be restricted, just as there must be rules of order in a seminar or committee meeting" (21). Although hypertext *presents*

student texts and student-formed links as well as those created by instructors, students and teachers do not have equal control over the material:

> The ease of contributing . . . can produce so much material that one requires some means of preventing readers from becoming swamped by information. . . . First, a body of materials can have a gatekeeper . . . who permits certain contributions to enter the corpus permanently, or . . . how long they remain available . . .
>
> Second, the hypermedia system can employ hierarchies of permissions that permit users to read, link to, or modify texts. (36)

The language employed here ("gatekeeper," "permissions") suggest that hypertext, in practice, is still controlled from above- the "center" reappears. We must be careful not to forget that although computer mediated communication presents opportunities for a specific kind of (virtual) equality, someone still owns the computer system, and probably owns the patent on the software which organizes the hypertextual "corpus," or more pointedly, the canon. The system Landow and Delany describe is remarkable in allowing (though necessarily limited) student contributions.

These limitations on students' ability to change links also raises the question of access, and equality of access. Hypertext systems are expensive— most of the major projects in hypertext have been either funded by or later purchased by corporations[2] — and the involvement of software and hardware manufacturers should not be taken simply as enlightened corporate self-sacrifice. In a time when many universities are jettisoning entire departments, the resources necessary to create and exchange hypertexts, especially at a level approaching Nelson's docuverse, won't be available in most departmental budgets. In fact, even Nelson, generally hyperbolic in his descriptions of hypertext, recognizes that someone has to pay:

> Think of everyone at screens; a billion screens around the planet. And each person at a screen will be able to extract from a great common pool any fragment of whatever is published, with automatic royalty and no red tape.
>
> Why automatic royalty? Why shouldn't it be free? Because designing such a system doesn't stop with the computer software. The design has to include a viable economic basis. (44)

Thus, while hypertext may theoretically throw into question the status of the author and issues of copyright, the outcome of this questioning may not be any more "free" than the current print based model.

IV. Conclusion: Radical Technologies and Traditional Classes, or The Possibilities are *Virtually* Endless

As Selfe and Selfe have suggested, "computer interfaces can be mapped as complex political landscapes . . . [or] linguistic contact zones" (481-82). When students interact with computers, they are confronted by a system of representation that is ideologically loaded; "in general, computer interfaces present reality as framed in the perspective of modern capitalism, thus, orienting technology along an existing axis of class privilege" (486). Their own example is revealing both for what it notices and what it leaves out (in hypertext terms, the links which are available, and the links which are absent):

> The graphically intuitive Macintosh interface . . . map[s] the virtual world as a *desktop*— constructing virtual reality, by association, in terms of corporate culture: manila folders, files, documents, telephones, fax machines, clocks and watches, and desk calendars. . . . The interface does not, for example, represent the world in terms of a kitchen counter top, a mechanic's workbench, or a fast-food restaurant— each of which would constitute the virtual world in different terms according to the values and orientations of, respectively,

> women in the home, skilled laborers, or the rapidly increasing numbers of employees in the fast food industry. (486-87).

What is omitted is that the desktop metaphor applies not only to corporate culture, but to most of post-secondary educational culture as well[4]. That is to say, desktops and folders are also indicators of the traditional educational environment; the linkage between corporate capitalist culture and education is not created by the interface so much as mirrored in it. Selfe and Selfe remind us that in employing technology "to enact educational practices that are more democratic and less systematically oppressive," we must be careful not to allow the "rhetoric of technology" to elide the fact that computers "are not necessarily serving democratic ends" (483-84). We must be wary of confusing the online environment, in which students' backgrounds seem to fade into the background, with everyday reality, and the reality of our own positions of institutionally sanctioned authority.

How can one actualize the kinds of anti-hierarchical thinking computers allow us to (temporarily) visualize? How can we investigate the possibilities of computer mediated communication without naturalizing the hierarchy of the unplugged classroom? In other words, how can we make the physical community closer to the virtual one, and vice versa? Lester Faigley's discussion of postmodern theory and composition pedagogy suggests that:

> While postmodern theory does not supply an agenda for social agency, it does uncover networks of relations of power, how these relations are constituted, and how we do and do not think about them. . . . theory . . . locate[s] spaces where change occurs and re-focuses attention on the politics of knowledge and practice. (24).

One of these spaces is, of course, the composition classroom. Computers in the composition classroom offer an opportunity for the uncovering of networks of power, but we must be aware of "how we do and do not think about them." Most

importantly, we cannot be satisfied with the liberation rhetoric associated with some forms of electronic learning, and we must not assume that liberatory moments do not occur in "traditional" classrooms. Our students, after all, don't receive virtual grades; they receive real grades which have real effects. While the electronic communities we construct on computer networks and the textual collaborations we build as hypertexts may appear radically democratic, we must remember they are only virtually so.

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[1] Thus English Natural Form Instruction has become Electronic Networks For Interaction; the acronym is preserved despite a major change in focus, goals, and contexts.

[2] The World Wide Web on the Internet, perhaps the closest system in existence to a universal hypertext web, is an illustrative example. Many of the creators of Mosaic, a web client produced by the National Center for Supercomputing Applications, have gone on to found Netscape Communications, and a commercial version of Mosaic, with enhanced capabilities, is now available. Additionally, one sector of rapid growth on the WWW is commercial home pages offering everything from automobile parts to frozen pizza, from on-line computer shopping to digitized pornography.

[3] I also wonder why the "kitchen counter top" would suggest only the "values and orientations" of *women* in the home - where do men in the home cook? In other words, what is the politics of this association?

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